



Short report

Ned Kelly tattoos – Origins and forensic implications

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ABSTRACT

Tattoos depicting Ned Kelly, a 19th-century Australian bushranger (outlaw) are occasionally encountered in the contemporary Australian population at forensic autopsy. To determine the characteristics of decedents with such tattoos, twenty cases were identified in the autopsy files at Forensic Science SA. All of the decedents were white males (100%) with an age range of 20–67yrs (average 37yrs). Seventeen of the deaths (85%) were unnatural, due to suicide in eight cases (40%), accidents in seven cases (35%) and homicide in two cases (10%). Compared to the general autopsy population suicides and homicides were 2.7 and 7.7 times higher, respectively, than would be expected, with a striking male predominance. A Ned Kelly tattoo identified at autopsy in another country or in a disaster victim identification situation may suggest that the decedent was Australian or had a connection with that country. Although the population studied is highly selected, individuals with these tattoos had an above average incidence of traumatic deaths.

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1. Introduction

The word tattoo refers to marking of the skin with indelible words, patterns or pictures by puncturing the skin and inserting pigments. Tattoos have been found in most communities and cultural groups for thousands of years and have been used for a variety of purposes ranging from the identification of higher classes, to the marking of prisoners.¹ In certain criminal groups such as the Yakuza in Japan, and inmates of Russian and Soviet prisons tattooing may be extremely elaborate and record the history of the wearer.²

Tattoos may be useful forensically to assist with identification and to provide some indication of the possible history of a decedent. For example, syringes, and marihuana leaves may suggest drug usage, whereas military tattoos are most often found in war veterans and may give a guide to the age of the deceased based on the type of tattoo and the event recorded. Primitive line tattoos with antisocial and anti-police messages may indicate previous imprisonment.^{1,2}

Certain tattoos are specific to particular cultural groups or countries. In Australia a tattoo that may be encountered at forensic autopsy is one depicting a nineteenth century bushranger (outlaw), Ned Kelly. The characteristic body armor that he was wearing at the

time of his capture by colonial police and/or his alleged last words on judicial hanging (“such is life”) are often found incorporated into these designs. Given that this tattoo is most likely to be found only in an Australian cultural context the following study was undertaken to determine the characteristics of decedents with this design and to analyze causes and manner of death.

2. Materials and methods

Twenty cases were identified in the autopsy files at Forensic Science SA (FSSA) where a design depicting either Ned Kelly or the words “such is life” had been recorded. All cases had undergone full autopsies with police and coronial investigations. The age, sex and race were noted along with the circumstances, cause and manner of death. Forensic Science SA is the state forensic facility where medicolegal autopsies are performed. The population served is approximately 1.6 million.

3. Results

All of the decedents were white males (100%) with an age range of 20–67 years (average 37 years). Deaths were due to natural diseases in only three cases (15%) consisting of pneumonia, myocardial infarction and a subarachnoid hemorrhage. The remaining 17 deaths (85%) were due to suicide in eight cases (40%), accidents in seven cases (35%) and homicide in two cases (10%). Suicides were the result of hanging ($N = 3$), drug toxicity/poisoning ($N = 2$), carbon monoxide toxicity ($N = 1$), ligature transection of the neck ($N = 1$) and a gunshot

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Fig. 1. A typical Ned Kelly tattoo depicting Kelly in his body armor with a metal helmet forged from ploughshares.

wound to the head ($N = 1$). Accidents were due to vehicle crashes ($N = 3$), drug toxicity ($N = 2$), saltwater drowning ($N = 1$) and incineration ($N = 1$). The two homicides involved stabbing and shooting ($N = 1$, respectively). Eleven of the victims (55%) either had histories or autopsy/toxicology findings indicating illicit drug or alcohol abuse: four involving intravenous opiate use, four involving amphetamine use and three involving chronic alcohol abuse.

The tattoos consisted of depictions of Ned Kelly or his helmet ($N = 15$) (Fig. 1), Ned Kelly and the words “such is life” ($N = 3$) (Figs. 2 and 3), or just the words “such is life” ($N = 2$) (Fig. 4). The image of Kelly was sometimes combined with other designs (Fig. 5). In three cases a Eureka flag was also incorporated into the design (Fig. 6). In every case tattoos other than the Ned Kelly image were present.

At FSSA in 2010 there were 1117 adult autopsies overall, which included 559 natural deaths (50%), 169 suicides (15%) and 14 homicides (1.3%). The overall male to female ratio was 2:1. Thus there was a much higher incidence of suicides (40%) and homicides (10%) amongst those with Ned Kelly tattoos compared to the general adult autopsy population, with a striking male predominance.

4. Discussion

Ned Kelly was an Irish-Australian bushranger (outlaw) who was born in rural Victoria in 1854. His career was marked by conflict



Fig. 2. The quality of these tattoos varies from quite complex works shown in Fig. 1 to a much more primitive version illustrated here.

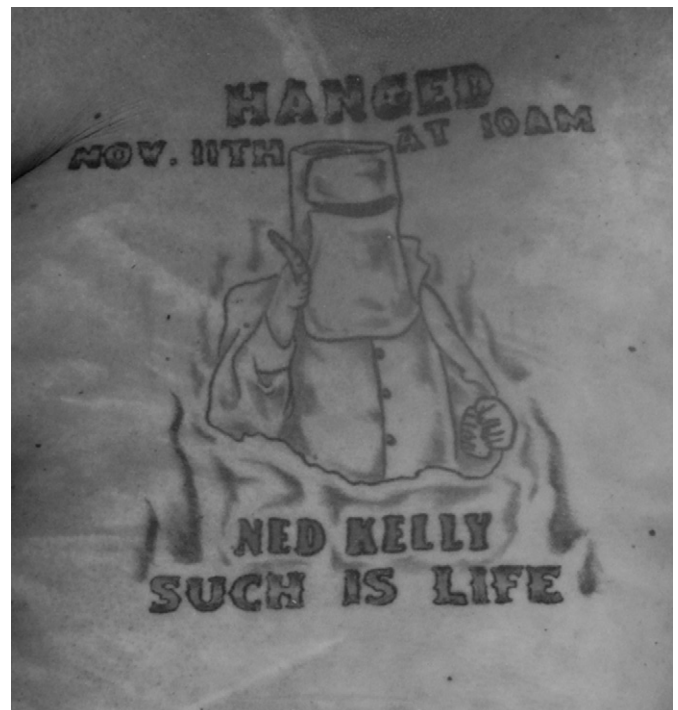


Fig. 3. Some of the tattoos incorporate Kelly's alleged final words of “such is life”.



Fig. 4. Occasional tattoos have only Kelly's alleged past words.

with the colonial police culminating in the infamous gun fight at Stringybark Creek in 1878 where three serving police officers were shot and killed.³ Following this incident the Kelly Gang, as his group was then known, committed bank robberies at Jerilderie and Euroa. The government response to the police shootings was to outlaw the gang and authorize shooting of the members on sight. The



Fig. 5. Kelly's image may be worked into other designs including an angel, revolver and handcuffs.



Fig. 6. The Eureka flag also carries with it anti-establishment sentiments as it was first raised during a rebellion on the Victorian goldfields.

culmination of Ned Kelly's career occurred at the Glenrowan Inn where the gang had taken numerous hostages and had attempted to derail a passenger train that was bringing police reinforcements.³ Ned Kelly had fashioned cumbersome body armor that is often depicted in tattoos, which covered his head and trunk but which left his legs unprotected. Following numerous gunshot wounds to the legs from police who had surrounded the inn, he was captured, taken to Melbourne for trial and executed by hanging on 11 November 1880 (Fig. 7). Whether he actually uttered the famous last words "such is life" is unclear; for example an alternative version, that appears less popular among tattooists, reports his final words as "ah well, I suppose...".³ The other members of the gang had perished at the inn.

Kelly is a dominant figure in the popular perception of Australian colonial history with quite disparate opinions being voiced. On one hand he is viewed as a common criminal given to cattle rustling and armed conflict with the police, while on the other he is viewed as an Irish freedom fighter standing up to the oppressive British authorities.³ On either side of the debate his image is generally taken as representing an anti-establishment position.

Ned Kelly tattoos are similar in design to traditional Western style tattoos that were once most commonly found among sailors or ex-navy personnel. Traditional designs included animals, sailing ships, roses, hearts, daggers, and scrolls with the names of family members.¹ However, once an image takes on an antisocial message it is often added to other designs, such as the Eureka flag found in two of the decedents (Fig. 6). The Eureka Flag was first raised during an armed uprising against the colonial government in 1854 near Ballarat on the Victorian goldfields in Australia.³



Fig. 7. The death mask of Ned Kelly taken from the original cast made after his execution in Melbourne jail in 1880.

Antisocial tattoos have been linked with mental illness and high-risk behavior, in addition to alcohol and drug abuse.^{4,5} While this has been debated, it is recognized that there is a link between tattooed or pierced young adolescents and drug abuse, gang membership and violence.^{5–7} In the current series the high rate of suicide and accidents would be in keeping with this, as would drug and alcohol abuse in 55% of cases.

In this study Ned Kelly tattoos were restricted to white males aged between 20 and 67 years. There were no females in this group, which is significantly different to the general FSSA autopsy population where the male to female ratio was approximately 2:1 in 2010. Unnatural deaths predominated (85% of cases) compared to

approximately 50% of the autopsy population in 2010. Suicides and homicides were 2.7 and 7.7 times higher than would be expected.

A Ned Kelly tattoo identified at autopsy in another country or in a disaster victim identification (DVI) situation may suggest either that the decedent was Australian, or else that there had been some connection with that country. Although in this study there was a strong association with male gender and violent death when compared to the general forensic autopsy population, these findings would have to be compared to decedents with other types of tattoos to determine the precise significance of these trends. The population studied is also a highly selected one and these findings cannot be used to predict associations in the general community, as tattooing has become much more widespread in recent years, particularly amongst the young.⁸ However, in a forensic mortuary it is recognized that certain subsets of tattoos may identify individuals who have been at particular risk of violent and unnatural deaths. Individuals with Ned Kelly tattoos in this series certainly had an above average incidence of traumatic deaths compared to other forensic cases; ironically, this was also a feature of the ill-fated members of the Kelly gang whose leader is commemorated in these designs.

Ethical approval

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Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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